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## Bridging Authentic Experiences and Literacy Skills Through the Language Experience Approach

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### Abstract

Although the research base is small on adult English language learners (ELLs) who are learning English while also acquiring basic literacy, this research can still guide instructional practices. The essential components of reading skills suggests that the Language Experience Approach has the potential to integrate relevant meaning-focused reading with the instruction of basic reading skills. An example using the Language Experience Approach with low literacy ELLs is provided.

### Introduction

According to the U.S. Department of Education, 44% of the students in federally funded adult education programs in the United States are English as a second language (ESL) learners (Institute for Education Sciences, 2010). Nearly half of this population (48%) tested at the three lowest ESL levels of the National Reporting System: ESL beginning literacy, ESL Beginning Low, and ESL Beginning High (US Department of Education, 2008, as cited in Burt, Peyton, & Schaetzel, 2008). Many of these students have limited literacy skills both in their native language(s) and in English, and they often face the dual challenge of developing basic literacy skills as well as proficiency in English (Institute for Education Sciences, 2010).

There is little research on adult English language learners (ELLs) who are learning English and also acquiring basic literacy at the same time. However, the available research can still guide our practices with this population of learners. This article first reviews relevant

research related to adult learning and essential components of reading skills. Then the Language Experience Approach is reviewed. Finally, an example using the Language Experience Approach with low-literacy ELLs is illustrated, highlighting follow-up activities that aim to develop basic reading skills.

### Relevant Literature

#### Strengths That Adult ELLs with Limited Literacy Bring to Learning

One of the key assumptions for adult learning is that an adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experience which is a rich resource for learning (Knowles, 1980, as cited by Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Adult ELLs with limited literacy bring several strengths to the educational programs. One such strength is that while adult ELLs may lack literacy and formal education, they often have high oral skills in English (Geva & Zadeh, 2006). They acquired high oral language skills

through various survival functions such as shopping, speaking to their children's teachers, and seeking employment.

Another strength comes from their rich life experience and special knowledge. One study, for example, described a Puerto Rican family's knowledge and skills across generations with few formal schooling opportunities (Olmedo, 1997, as cited in Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010). This family possessed many skills such as sewing and cooking that they used to support their relatives in Puerto Rico and later in New York City. Through this study, the researcher sought to create a new conceptualization of multicultural education that challenges the deficit theories, which set low expectations for these adult learners and their children.



### What Works for Adults with Limited Literacy

Another key assumption for adult learning is that the readiness of an adult to learn is closely related to the developmental tasks of one's social roles (Knowles, 1980, as cited by Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Adults are motivated to learn if the learning is directly applicable to their lives. This principle applies to adult ELLs with low literacy levels as well.

Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, and Soler (2002) conducted a nationwide U.S. study of adult learners and examined changes in the literacy practices of these adults as a result of attending adult literacy programs. They found that using real-life materials and authentic activities in adult literacy classes impacts the literacy practices of these learners. Specifically, they found that adults who attended programs or classes with more authentic literacy activities reported (a) reading and

writing more often outside of the classroom and (b) reading and writing more complex texts.

Condelli, Wrigley, Yoon, Cronen, and Seburn (2003) conducted a nationwide study in the U.S. that examines what strategies work for low-level literacy students in developing their English reading skills and oral skills. Participants were new immigrants with less than 6 years of schooling in their home countries. They did not possess strong literacy skills in either their native language(s) or English. One of the key findings for reading development was that their reading improved more, as measured by standardized tests if they were in classes where the teacher implemented more real-life activities.

### Essential Components of Reading Skills

Reading is viewed as an interactive, meaning-making endeavor that includes both meaning-focused, top-down processes and skill-focused, bottom-up processes (Birch, 2002). Adult ELLs with limited literacy need lessons that focus both on meaning and on basic reading skills. The five essential components of reading skills are (a) phonemic awareness, (b) word study/phonics, (c) vocabulary, (d) fluency, and (e) comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000).

**Phonemic Awareness.** Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate individual sounds in words. For example, separating the spoken word "cat" into three distinct sounds, /k/, /æ/, and /t/, requires phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is important to the reading process because it is associated with improvement in reading and spelling (Ehri et al., 2001). ELLs whose first language has a drastically different phonological system such as Chinese or Arabic may have difficulty identifying word boundaries in English (Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010).



**Phonics.** Phonics is a method for teaching the correspondence between sounds and the spelling patterns that represent them. It equips learners

with effective decoding strategies. Denton, Antony, and Parker (2004) maintain that ELLs who receive phonics instruction as part of a comprehensive reading program usually develop stronger foundational reading skills.

**Vocabulary.** Vocabulary is knowledge of words and their meanings. Reading vocabulary is critical to the comprehension processes of a reader (Burt, Peyton, & Van Duzer, 2005). Eskey (2005) suggested that acquiring the meaning of vocabulary from the context, a strategy often taught by teachers, is difficult for ELLs with limited literacy because they have limited vocabulary. Therefore, vocabulary should be deliberately taught for adult ELLs.

**Fluency.** Fluency is the ability to read easily and accurately and with appropriate rhythm and expression. Fluent readers recognize and comprehend words simultaneously while making sense of the text as they read. Burt, Peyton, and Van Duzer (2005) cautioned that extensive oral reading might not be effective for adult ELLs with limited literacy because accuracy in oral reading may be affected by native language interference. They suggested selecting short passages and emphasizing English stress and intonation while incorporating oral reading.

**Comprehension.** Reading comprehension is the ability to discern meaning from the written text and is the focus of all reading engagement. Irvin (1986) conceptualizes comprehension as the interaction between the reader and the text; the reader activates prior knowledge and experiences in addition to drawing from clues within the text to make meaning. Cultural differences may hinder ELLs from text comprehension. Selecting appropriate texts that the learners are familiar with, building background knowledge, and pre-teaching



vocabulary are all strategies for instructing adult ELLs with limited literacy (Burt, Peyton, & Van Duzer, 2005).

Drawing from the research reviewed in this section, two important principles emerge that can be used to guide reading instruction for adult ELLs with limited literacy. First, adult learners learn best when instruction is consistently grounded in meaningful, relevant contexts and draws from learners' life experiences. Secondly, basic reading skills should be integrated into literacy instruction. The Language Experience Approach has the potential to integrate relevant meaning-focused reading with the instruction of basic reading skills.

### Language Experience Approach

The central principle of the Language Experience Approach is to use students' own vocabulary, language patterns, and experiences to create reading texts to make reading an especially meaningful and enjoyable process (Nessel & Nixon, 2008). An experience can be something in which all have participated such as field trips, hands-on activities, movies, cross-cultural experiences, role plays, games, or sharing pictures or stories. The Language Experience Approach includes the following basic steps:

1. Teacher elicits statements from students about an experience.
2. Teacher writes students' statements verbatim.
3. Teacher reads the story aloud as students read it silently. Ask if students have anything to add or correct. Teacher may also ask clarifying questions if the meaning is not clear.
4. Students read the story several times.
5. Students copy the story and write down new words.
6. Vocabulary and comprehension activities follow. (Bell & Dy, 1980; Nessel & Nixon, 2008)

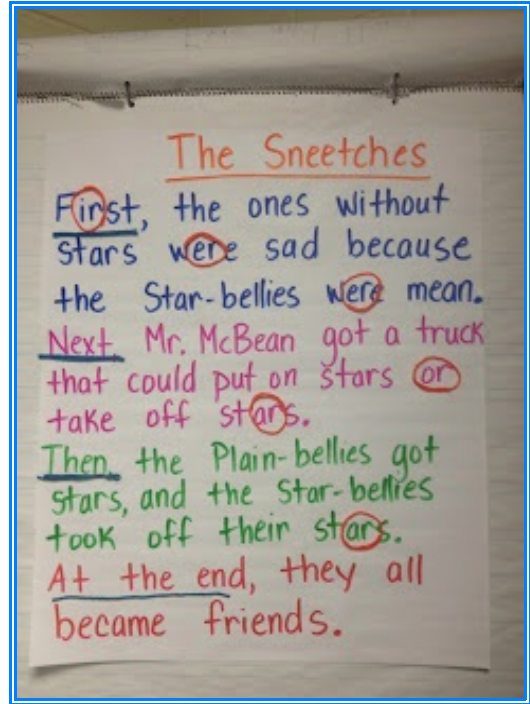
The Language Experience Approach was first introduced at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a

technique for elementary school children learning to read. It was developed in response to the phonic-based reading instruction, which teaches sound-symbol correspondences, building reading skills from bottom-up. The phonic-based reading instruction was viewed as problematic because it relied solely on the letter-by-letter, word-by-word reading process. As people read they do not perceive every single letter or word. They actively construct the text using all of their resources (Taylor, 1993). The Language Experience Approach builds upon a learner's oral language skills and experiences in the world as the foundation for reading and writing. Students are guided through a discussion of an experience and then on to the verbatim transcription of that discussion. They are able to see how an entire text is formed rather than working from bottom-up on the development of isolated decoding skills. Students begin to feel that reading and writing can become as easy and as natural as speech (Taylor 1993).

The Language Experience Approach also allows the instructor to teach reading skills such as phonemic awareness, fluency, reading comprehension as follow-up activities. Instead of presenting skills such as vocabulary and phonics in a decontextualized way, the Language Experience Approach provides a balance of creating meaningful texts and attending to reading skills. When students generate the text based on their own experiences, learners can discover how letters and sounds are related, how new words are spelled, and how to read the text accurately with understanding.



The Language Experience Approach has many advantages for adult ELLs with limited literacy because it capitalizes and builds upon learners' experiences, knowledge, and skills, and it allows both meaning-



focused and skill-focused learning. Adults have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge that may be culture-related, family-related, and related to their previous education. In a way, adults have advantages over children in that they can make meaningful connections more easily between their life experiences and the language they are learning. When students' past experiences are used as the basis for learning written symbols and developing literacy, students are more motivated to learn. In addition, the reading process is made easier when these adult ELLs read texts that are relevant to their lives, when the words of the texts are in their listening and speaking vocabularies, and when the grammatical structures of the texts are similar to those they use orally.

One difficulty for adult ELLs with limited literacy is that the published textbooks suitable for use with these learners are very limited. There are many reasons why textbook materials are unsuitable for these learners. Solorzano (1994) noted that "commercially published materials...usually include preordained competencies and/or skills that are unrelated to the [ESL] learners' needs or goals" (p. 8). Reading texts generated by

learners themselves and about their own experiences make reading so much more meaningful and interesting. In the Language Experience Approach, the texts generated by the learner use not only the learners' experiences, but they also are their own statements when dictating the story or account. The content of the statements as well as words and sentence patterns are those with which the learners are most familiar, and therefore, they are highly meaningful.

### **A Sample Language Experience Approach Text and Follow-Up Activities**

Yesterday, we walk around the school building. We start our walk at the school entrance. We see the security guard and say, "Hello". Then, we go to the computer room. We see students working

on computers. There are offices, classrooms, and restrooms on the first floor. We walk up the stairs. Our classroom is on the second floor.

This text was generated by my students of beginning literacy level following a 10-minute walk around the school building. As we walked around, I discussed new vocabulary words with them. For example, at the entrance of the building, I said, "This is the school entrance." Upon returning to the classroom, I assisted them in generating the text by asking questions such as: Where did we start the walk? Who did we see? What did you say to the security guard? I wrote their answers to my questions on the board. I read the text to them once and asked if they had anything to add. After we agreed upon the final text, I developed the following activities aiming to develop learners' basic reading skills.

#### **1. Phonemic Awareness and Vocabulary Learning**

I asked the students to choose 5 words from the text they want to work on. The following procedure, adapted from Tindall and Nisbet (2010), was used when teaching each word: (a) say the word: *entrance*, and ask students to repeat; (b) read the sentence from the text together with a picture: *We start our walk at the school entrance*; (c) offer a user-friendly definition: *An entrance is a door*; (d) conduct a phonological awareness activity: "Listen to the word, *entrance*: /en/ /trance/," and clap hands with each syllable spoken; (e) ask students to make word cards, copying each word on one side and illustrating it with drawings on the other side; and (f) ask them to take turns and read each word aloud.

#### **2. Cloze Text**

After working on the vocabulary words, I created a cloze text with the vocabulary words we worked on deleted. The students could consult their word cards when trying to complete the cloze text in a small group.

Yesterday, we walk around the school \_\_\_\_\_. We start our walk at the school \_\_\_\_\_. We see the \_\_\_\_\_ and say, "Hello". Then, we go to the \_\_\_\_\_ room. We see students working on computers. There are \_\_\_\_\_, classrooms, and restrooms on the first floor. We walk up the \_\_\_\_\_. Our classroom is on the second \_\_\_\_\_.

### 3. Grouping Words with the Same Beginning Sound

Students were asked to group words with the same sounds. This exercise was intended for them to practice phonics skills.

/s/

school, start, see, security, students, stairs, second

/k/

computer, classroom,

/w/

walk, we, work

/f/

first, floor

### 4. Reading Fluency

The following steps, adapted from Tindall and Nisbet (2010), were used to practice reading fluency: (a) modeling fluent oral reading, (b) having the students read orally with the teacher, (c) having students orally echo read, and (d) having students orally read alone accompanied by feedback.

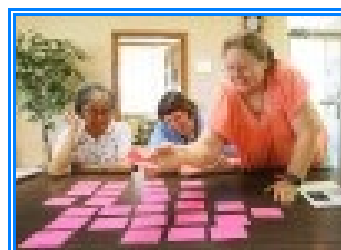
### 5. Yes or No

This was a simple reading comprehension exercise. Students were asked to circle YES if the statement is true and NO if the statement is not true.

- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. We walk around the school building the day before yesterday. | YES | NO |
| 2. We start our walk at the school entrance.                    | YES | NO |
| 3. We see Mr. Smith and said, "Hello".                          | YES | NO |
| 4. Then we go to Mr. Smith's office.                            | YES | NO |
| 5. There are no offices on the first floor.                     | YES | NO |
| 6. Our classroom is on the second floor.                        | YES | NO |

### 6. Scrambled Sentences

The text was typed and cut into sentence strips. Students worked together to recreate the text. Groups took turns to read their recreated text.



## Conclusion

Adult ELLs with limited literacy face the dual challenge of developing literacy skills as well as proficiency in English. However, they also bring with them an array of life experiences, skills, and oral proficiencies that are often neglected in the classroom practices. The Language Experience Approach model allows educators for adult ELLs with limited literacy to capitalize on these strengths and use them as a learning resource for the learners while also focusing on basic reading skills. The Language Experience Approach model benefits adult ELLs with limited literacy because it allows learners to make meaning out of a text before focusing on particular sounds, words, and other reading skills using the same text. Using this approach, learners begin to feel that reading can be a fun, natural, and easy process that is not very different from speech.

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